

Why Use This Checklist?

This checklist provides a list of natural resources issues for communities to consider during the development of their comprehensive plans. It is organized by the chapters that typically are in a comprehensive plan. A community's comprehensive plan presents an opportunity to identify the natural resources that make the community unique and on which the community depends. Growth can then be accommodated away from important natural resource areas and towards better suited areas in a planned way.

NR Checklist Series

This is one of a series of "checklists" produced for local units of government (LUG) by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Metro Region. Each checklist is intended to help the community integrate natural resources into a particular type of local policy or plan. Each checklist is an outline of key components of a typical LUG planning document with important natural resource-related questions to consider and some examples, definitions, and references.

I. Introduction

Vision Statement

To ensure a plan that reflects community values, a vision statement developed with input from a wide variety of citizens representing diverse sectors of the community may be included in the comprehensive plan.

- ' Does the community's vision statement include a description of historical and current natural features within the community and its surroundings to help set the stage for desired future conditions?
- ' Does the vision statement give a basis for natural resource-related goals and policies in subsequent sections?

II. Community Background

Most comprehensive plans contain a section describing the community, its demographics, and land-based resources.

Natural Resource Inventory

Natural resource inventories and analyses are the basis for natural resource planning in any comprehensive plan.

- ' Does the community's assessment of its historical and existing conditions include information from a natural resource inventory and analysis? For example, does it address resources such as the following?
 - ' lakes, rivers, streams, watersheds, floodplains
 - ' wetlands
 - ' water quality
 - ' water supply
 - ' forestlands and urban forests
 - ' native plant communities
 - ' rare, endangered, and threatened species
 - ' wildlife and wildlife habitat
 - ' soils, landforms, and geological features
 - ' air quality and noise

See Another Checklist natural resource inventory

A natural resource inventory and assessment identifies and prioritizes the natural resources that a community needs to manage through its comprehensive plan and operational strategies. See the "Natural Resource Inventory and Analysis for City or County" Checklist..

III. Issues

A comprehensive plan may have a section which lists the current issues of concern to the community.

- ' What is the relationship of natural resource conservation and development within the community? I.e. how are current and future development pressures affecting the conservation and use of natural resources?
- ' How are the community's natural resources being managed?
 - ' Who is responsible for the management of publicly owned natural resources?
 - ' What responsibilities do entities proposing new development and/or changes in land use have in the conservation and management of natural resources on their property?

IV. Policy Plan

The most critical section of a comprehensive plan is the statement of policies which are guide city action, particularly in the area of land use, housing, and public facilities. This checklist suggests a separate natural resources section in the policy plan and it also identifies a few of the considerations of how natural resources should be treated in other plan elements.

Sustainability

- ' Does the plan have a general goal and specific policies promoting the balanced and sustainable use of natural resources in the community to accommodate both the economic and non-economic needs of residents, industries and visitors?

A. Natural Resources

- ' Does the plan have a separate section with specific goals and policies that address natural resources?
- ' How do the community's goals and policies balance a healthy environment, a sound local economy, a high quality of life and sense of pride in the community?
- ' What is the relationship between public and privately controlled natural resources?
 - ' What role does the community want to play in guiding or controlling stewardship of natural resources on private lands?

Greenways & Natural Areas

- ' Does the community have a goal and policies that explicitly strives for a network of natural areas and natural resource-based open space (sometimes called "greenways")?
- ' Are specific uses, such as recreation, protection, conservation

Definitions

natural area

a site largely unaltered by modern human activity, where vegetation is distributed in naturally occurring patterns.

greenway

a network of natural areas and natural resource-based open space which may be primarily intended as wildlife habitat corridors or may include trail connections

and utilization assigned to different portions of the network?

- ' Is a target percentage of natural open space specified for the community? E.g., is a target for protected natural areas distinct from targets for sports and recreations areas?
- ' Have specific land protection tools been identified for each component of the network?
- ' Have adequate management plans been developed for each component of the network?

Biological Diversity

- ' Does at least one goal in the plan express a commitment to conserving biological diversity by avoiding fragmentation of natural areas and maintaining green corridors that connect open space?
- ' Does the plan commit to the protection and management of rare species and natural areas identified by the Minnesota County Biological Survey?

Forest Resources

Forest resources include any rural forest lands (e.g., native forest communities, woodlands, plantations, etc.) as well as urban forests (trees within towns and developed areas such as those along streets, on public property and in private property).

- ' Are the goals of forest management within the community clearly outlined? Are goals appropriate for forestry issues related to the following:
 - ' forest health protection
 - ' timber management and income generation
 - ' wildlife management
 - ' hazard tree management
 - ' street tree management
 - ' resource preservation and/or restoration
 - ' forest recreation opportunities
- ' Are forestry goals and policies consistent with those of other sections of the plan?
 - ' Do they address conversion of non-forest land to forest and vice versa?
 - ' Are forest resources given the same priority as other natural resources?

Soils

- ' Does the community have any goals and policies that address soil conservation, including ones such as the following?
 - ' protecting soils from compaction during development
 - ' protecting steep or otherwise erodible slopes

B. Water Resources

- ' Does the plan have policies on stormwater management, water supply, water quality, water bodies and shorelands (lakes, rivers, streams, etc.), floodplains, wetlands, and other water-related resources of community concern?
- ' Are these policies consistent with the community's natural resource goals?
- ' Does the plan have at least one set of goals and policies related to conservation of ground water, surface water, lakes and wetlands?

Watershed Approach

- ' Do water resource goals and policies take a watershed approach to planning, considering human activities that affect water, land/water interactions, aquatic life and aquatic resources and in particular, potential impacts to other communities upstream or downstream within the watershed?
- ' Does the plan refer to a more detailed watershed plan identifying areas suitable for development, specifying guidelines to be followed in development designs, and providing for resource management?

Stormwater Management

- ' Does the plan encourage the retention of rain water, allowing it to naturally percolate through the landscape using swales, retention ponds, etc. to slow and absorb stormwater?
- ' Is a limit set on the percentage of impervious surfaces allowed in new developments?

Wastewater management

- ' For areas outside the Metro Urban Service Area, does the plan clearly describe policies related to wastewater treatment systems and the ongoing monitoring and maintenance needed to minimize their impact on water quality?
- ' Does the plan support wastewater technological alternatives, such as natural wastewater treatment systems?

C. Land Use

- ' Do the land use policies explicitly recognize natural areas or natural open space as a long term use in the community?

D. Housing

- ' How are natural resource conservation and housing goals and policies being used to reinforce each other?
- ' Are the community's natural resource conservation policies consistent with policies for providing affordable housing?

<p>Resource & Reference This checklist includes ideas from "Under Construction: Tools and Techniques for Local Planning" Minnesota Planning. 2002. It gives many examples of how different components of comprehensive plans can be coordinated with each other. It also has extensive tips and resources on doing comp. plans.</p>

E. Economic Development

- ' To what extent do natural resources in the community support the local economy, such as in the following sectors?
 - ' agriculture (soils)
 - ' mining (minerals)
 - ' forest products (forests)
 - ' tourism
 - ' recreation
- ' How do the community's economic development and natural resource policies complement each other?

F. Public Facilities & Services

Transportation

- ' Does the plan provide for diverse, alternative modes of transportation?
- ' What impact do transportation corridors have on natural areas within the community?
- ' How do transportation corridors provide opportunities for recreation (trails and access), natural resource (greenway) corridors, and habitat restoration?
- ' How does the siting of new transportation corridors, interchanges, etc. and resultant adjoining development affect the community's natural resources?
- ' What are the city's transportation-related goals and policies on preserving viewsheds, establishing buffers, narrowing rights-of-way, minimizing impervious surfaces, and limiting grading?
- ' How are potential conflicts addressed, such as the following:
 - ' between natural area conservation and safety policies along transportation corridors? (e.g., wildlife crossings and road kill)
 - ' between different modes of transportation? (e.g., bicycles and cars)

Parks & Other Community Facilities

- ' How do the community's park policies relate to the conservation of natural areas and establishment of a system of natural area-based greenways? (See section above.)

Public Safety

- ' Has public safety (i.e. fire protection, police, etc.) been considered in relation to open space management?
- ' Does the vegetation and proximity to housing contribute to a potential for fire prone property?
- ' Are any community policies related to using prescribed burning as a vegetation management tool consistent with the community's fire protection goals?

V. Implementation

Each comprehensive plan contains an implementation section which most typically contains general direction on the city's land use policies, zoning, and capital improvements.

A. Development Controls

A primary function of a comprehensive plan is as a policy framework for local government's role in controlling development and private land use activities which impact the health, safety and welfare of the community.

- ' What types of strategies and/or regulations are needed to implement the natural resource-related policies?

Land Use Plan

- ' Are locations of natural areas or natural open space to be protected explicitly shown on the community's land use map?

Zoning

- ' What zoning tools (such as the following which can be free standing ordinances or part of the zoning ordinance) would be effective to implement natural resource policies?
 - ' natural area overlay district
 - ' site plan review or landscape ordinance
 - ' forest and/or agricultural land protection district
 - ' community forestry ordinance
 - ' tree protection or tree preservation ordinance
 - ' stormwater management ordinance
 - ' shoreland ordinance
 - ' exotic species, wild animal, and/or feral cat ordinance
 - ' hunting (firearms discharge) ordinance
- ' How is natural resources conservation incorporated into the community's subdivision regulations or ordinance?
 - ' Are conservation subdivisions (or cluster development) allowed which effectively and permanently protect open space?
 - ' Are density bonuses given for natural resource conservation?
 - ' Are firewise community principles (reducing loss of life and property from wildfires) incorporated into the subdivision regulations?
- ' Who is responsible for enforcement?

See Another Checklist natural area overlay district

One tool a community can use to protect and conserve natural areas is a natural area overlay district ordinance used in conjunction with their zoning ordinance. See the "Natural Environmental Areas Overlay District Ordinance" Checklist.

See Another Checklist density bonuses

One development incentive a community can use to protect and conserve natural areas is to give a developer a density bonus for conserving natural resources on a development site. See the "Conserving Natural Resources through Density Bonuses" Checklist.

Environmental Review

- ' How effectively is the responsible local government unit in using environmental review processes to assess natural resources and reduce damage to the resources?

- ' Has the community used the Alternative Urban Areawide Review (AUAR) process to address cumulative effects of development on natural resources in a larger area and to identify effective mitigation strategies?

B. Fiscal Tools

Capital Improvement Plan

- ' Does the community's capital program fund acquisition (including easements) of greenways and natural areas?

C. Operations

Local comprehensive plan documents typically do not include a section on the operations, budget, staffing, and procedures of their local government departments. However, many goals and policies need implementation plans which address the following.

Local Government Budget, Staffing, & Operations

- ' How are the plan's natural resource-related goals and policies reflected in the City' budget and operations?
- ' What local governmental unit (department) is responsible for carrying out each natural resource-related policy or strategy?
- ' Do responsible staff have sufficient training and expertise in natural resources or are provisions made to hire qualified professional consultants?
- ' Does the community have the equipment and trained technical staff and/or equipment operators (or access and funds for consultants) needed to carry-out safe and effective management of the resources, such as needed for the following activities?
 - ' prescribed burning
 - ' forest management, tree trimming, tree removal, and wood utilization and disposal
 - ' habitat restoration
 - ' nuisance wildlife (e.g., deer) control
 - ' invasive species control (e.g., buckthorn)
- ' Do any local regulations limit any of these practices? If so, what provisions or changes can be made?

See Another Checklist natural area management plan

Once a community designates a site for protection as a natural area, a site-specific inventory and management plan is needed. The elements of this type of plan are outlined in the "Natural Area Management Plan" Checklist.

Intergovernmental Relations

- ' What other governmental units (e.g. adjoining municipalities or townships, watershed districts, county, federal and state agencies) have jurisdiction over the community's natural resources?
- ' What opportunities exist for cooperative programs, grant applications, etc?
- ' Are any formal partnerships (e.g., joint power agreements) needed to conserve, protect or manage natural resources which cross political boundaries?